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## **Stop the Clock! Taking the Nation out of Linear Time and Bounded Space**

### **Abstract**

This article focuses on the importance of linear time and bounded space to the nation, which must have a past, present and future in a way that occludes other ways of grasping time. It offers a critique of national chronological time and advances an alternative analytical approach to national belonging based on a politics of longing embedded in 'wet ontology' that encompasses fluidity and migrant mobility. The article argues that rather than start with the nation-state as a category of analysis, as is the case with methodological nationalism, approaching a sense of belonging to the nation as part of a broader politics of longing offers a more open starting point for exploring the nation's many manifestations. The politics of longing posits that the nation is but one frame of reference among many, and by no means necessary to individuals' sense of belonging. It encompasses both restorative and reflective nostalgia as possible means of connecting individual narratives of belonging with ancestors and (national) heritage. The advantage of an approach derived from the politics of longing over methodological nationalism, understood as taking the nation-state for granted as a category of analysis, is that it allows for knitting together narratives of home and belonging in many different ways, both within and outwith the national frame.

**Key words:** methodological nationalism, time, nation, politics of longing, Oceania, wet ontology

The article critiques nationalism's exclusive focus on linear, chronological time and advances an alternative analytical approach to a sense of national belonging called a 'politics of longing'. To refuse stories told in terms of linear, national time challenges the legitimating basis of the global order, because states need national histories to shore up their legitimacy. Taking issue with the national time that anachronistically projects ethnonational groups back through history is therefore a political act, which reclaims the right to determine how the future will look. This article combines theoretical approaches from decolonial International Relations, Southeast Asian studies and human geography that step outside conventional temporalities, thereby transcending the national time that assumes ancient ethnic origins and ancestral

roots to be markers of 'authentic' belonging. The article argues that rather than start with a bounded notion of the nation moving through linear time as a category of analysis, approaching a sense of belonging to the nation as part of a broader politics of longing offers a more open point of departure for exploring its multifaceted manifestations in today's world. In so doing, the article contributes to ongoing debates across the social sciences and humanities that seek to transcend methodological nationalism, understood as taking the nation-state for granted as a category of analysis, and propose alternative frameworks for analysing national belonging (Taylor 1998, Levitt and Glick-Schiller 2004, Sutherland 2016). Analyses that are not predicated on methodological nationalism, in turn, serve to undermine the legitimacy of the nation-state construct itself, and question its control over people's movements, identities and allegiances.

The analysis begins with mobility. In so doing, it goes against the grain of contemporary world politics and methodologically nationalist political enquiry, both of which take named human populations encompassed within nation-states as their starting point. As Rogers Brubaker (2015, 132) has noted:

Mobility within nation-states is understood as normal and as something that should be facilitated (in that it contributes to the smooth functioning of labor markets and to cultural homogenization); but mobility between nation-states is understood as anomalous. Insofar as actual regimes of mobility approximate this idealized model, mobility is reciprocally linked to homogeneity within and heterogeneity between states.

This article turns that assumption on its head by positing human mobility as the norm. From a theoretical perspective, this also gestures towards ways of defining the nature of being - specifically *Wet Ontologies* (Steinberg and Peters, 2015) - that privilege fluidity and mobility. Migrant mobility is conventionally deemed anomalous because it challenges nation-states' supposedly bounded territoriality, homogeneity and sovereignty. If the state becomes untethered from the legitimating fiction of nation, its legitimacy is undermined as a result. A 'crisis of border control and migration management may therefore be seen to be a crisis of sovereignty' (De Genova 2017, 13), since it strikes at the heart of state control over territory. By the same token, academic analyses that are not predicated on methodological

nationalism serve to challenge the national construct itself, and question its control over people's movements, identities and allegiances. The experiences of both migrants, who are active shapers of their own destiny, and refugees, who make choices highly constrained by necessity and fear, highlight the often arbitrary nature of border enforcement and how the lottery of citizenship legislation make borders porous for those in possession of a privileged passport and impermeable for those who do not (McKeown 2008).

The argument is premised on the fact that nationalism is all around us and not confined to a far-right fringe. It is an inherent feature of modernity and the inequalities on which the Westphalian world order is built, which makes it particularly important to uncover contemporary nationalism's connections to colonialism. The article proceeds as follows: Section one introduces methodological nationalism through Benedict Anderson's seminal text, *Imagined Communities* (1991) and proposes the politics of longing as an alternative analytical perspective. The second section focuses on the colonial legacy which continues to inform how national belonging is defined, and how a decolonial approach to understanding belonging might transcend methodological nationalism. The third section proposes wet ontology (Steinberg and Peters 2015) as a counterpoint to conventional understandings of the nation in time and space. The fourth section goes on to discuss migrant mobility, since questioning ethnonational categories has profound implications for how 'natives' and 'foreigners' are conceptualised in terms of rootedness and ancestry. Together, the politics of longing, embedded in wet ontology, offer an alternative analytical approach to national belonging. This is illustrated in the final section with reference to an artwork by the Mata Aho collective entitled *Kiko Moana* (2017), as displayed in the *Oceania* exhibition at the Royal Academy in London in late 2018.

### **The Nation in Space and Time**

Methodological nationalism is understood as an approach that takes the nation-state for granted as a category of analysis, and that has both spatial and temporal dimensions. It refers to a scholarly approach rather than to nationalism as a political ideology, although both are underpinned by the same assumptions, namely that nations can be identified as bounded units that travel through time. This article takes

issue with the dominant paradigm of the nation, 'conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history' (Anderson 1991, 26). The nation's mobilising potential consists in its ability to link past and future generations of a national putative community, to which people feel they belong through ancestry, cultural heritage, shared values, common citizenship or other markers of membership. The nation is replete with symbols and embodiments of shared community, such as the national heroes who are held up for exemplary leadership in advancing the nation, and martyrs who have made the ultimate sacrifice to protect it. Nationalists feed on perceived past glories and injustices to rally support for their prognosis on the nation's future prospects, connecting the two through a sense of shared destiny and responsibility for a finite group.

Nationalism presupposes 'groupism' (Brubaker 2004) and the prioritisation of the nation, however defined, as its overarching ideological aim (Freedon 1998). The nation is bounded in space as an in-group defined in opposition to the out-group, and is often linked to territorial boundaries and an ethnic diaspora. This article sets out to trouble these fundamental premises, which serve to legitimate the nation-state construct, delimit who belongs to the nation, and thus ultimately underpin citizenship regimes and the world order (Sutherland 2010, 2012, 2016, 2017). James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta (2002) defined state spatialisation in terms of verticality and encompassment, thereby capturing the hierarchies and boundaries inherent in the nation-state construct. Parallel to this, the present analysis highlights how the idea of linear progress complements spatial encompassment and vertical hierarchy as a further dimension of the nation.

Benedict Anderson (1991, 26) noted that the 'idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which also is conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history.' As Nguyễn-võ Thu-hương (2017, 63) has shown, this equates to 'a nationalist prophetic temporality that erases the heterogeneity of time.' The legitimacy of the nation imagined in this conventional, linear and bounded way - and by extension any ethnic grouping that traces its origins back through time - rests on notions of rootedness and real or imagined ancestry, heritage and traditions. That is, the nation as an 'imagined community' (Anderson 1991) must have a past, present and future, in a way that occludes other ways of grasping time. In other words,

‘imagining a future allows the nation to become present [...] by providing a coherence to time, giving it a unidirectional flow’ (Nguyễn-võ 2017, 69, 70). The nation must therefore be conceived in both spatial and temporal terms to be intelligible.

Anderson (1991, 24) himself contrasts this understanding of nationalist prophetic temporality with medieval Christian representations of ‘a simultaneity of past and future in an instantaneous present’, as depicted on European church frescoes of wealthy benefactors appearing in biblical scenes. This suggests that spiritual practices which place the dead among the living offer an alternative chronotope to nationalist time, in that they allow for ‘the multi-directional potentiality of time occupied perhaps by multiple identifiable or unidentifiable persons with multiple futures, or the multi-directional temporality of memory’ (Nguyễn-võ 2017, 74). Recent approaches to nationalism in human geography have rightly emphasised the importance of emotion and affect (Closs Stephens 2016), and comparisons between religion and nationalism are long-standing (Brubaker 2015), but there is more to be said about how nationalism's emphasis on longevity, commemoration and ancestry relates to the spiritual element in a sense of belonging. Framing such enquiries in terms of the politics of longing as opposed to methodological nationalism recognises that group membership offers security, comfort and often spiritual nourishment (Walkerline 2012), but does not constrain or confine the terms that define belonging. Individuals may share a yearning to belong, but they do so across many different parameters and at various intensities across time and space.

Heonik Kwon (2010) uses the term politics of longing to describe the unique circumstances following the death of the North Korean leader Kim Il Sung in 1994. Adulation of the ‘Great Leader’ as an anti-colonial hero, combined with a form of Confucian filial piety that was embodied in his son Kim Jong Il but genuinely shared across much of the population, gave rise to a sort of ‘family state’ in North Korea. As Kwon notes; ‘The landscape of longing required devotion from every member of the family state, and the devotion was both spiritual and material dedication’ (Kwon 2010, 21). The centrality of spiritual devotion is important here. Whilst the combination of self-sacrifice and commemoration in the North Korean case is extreme, the idea of a politics of longing usefully encompasses elements of nostalgic yearning for a better time or place (when the Great Leader was alive), together with

the spiritual element that often forms part of a sense of belonging. Indeed, the words longing and belonging derive from the same Old English verb *langian*, the various meanings of which include to yearn and to summon, as well as to belong (with the prefix 'be' used as an intensifier).

The politics of longing go some way towards capturing the sense that 'belonging is fragile and contradictory' (Gonzales and Sigona 2017, 8). This offers an alternative analytical perspective on the nation to the idea of a solid, imagined community progressing down a linear history, to which Benedict Anderson refers. Svetlana Boym (2007, 3) points to how a real or imagined homeland can be a powerful source of nostalgia, understood as a longing for home or for a better time. It can thus be expressed in both spatial and temporal terms. Boym (2007, 3) links nostalgia to 'the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory.' She then goes on to distinguish between restorative and reflective nostalgia. Restorative nostalgia 'signifies a return to the original stasis', whereas rather than recreating 'the lost home, reflective nostalgia can foster the creation of aesthetic individuality' (Boym, 2007: 14).

The creative potential of reflective nostalgia provides a powerful example of a politics of longing because it does not necessarily conform to the chronology and unity that underpin nationalism. That is, it steps outside narratives of national belonging that are constrained by bounded space and linear time. Reflective nostalgia sometimes even 'thrives on the longing itself' (Moorti, 2003: 359) without actively pursuing a return to a particular place or past. Restorative nostalgia, by contrast, is easier to politicise in national terms by stoking fears of loss, maximising the appeal of familiarity, and connecting to the basic human need for a sense of security (Walkerdine 2012). Nostalgia for a lost homeland is most often associated with members of a diaspora, but it can also be felt by self-identifying natives yearning for a putative past that was somehow better, purer or brighter. In sum, nationalism thrives on restorative nostalgia, but reflective nostalgia can break the bounds of national space and time to inform an alternative perspective on politics, namely a politics of longing. A Vietnamese example provides an initial illustration of how the politics of longing might be applied in practice.

Janet Hoskins suggests a reading of the defunct Republic of Vietnam (a.k.a. South Vietnam) flag - three horizontal red stripes on yellow - as observed outside Cao Dai temples and on ancestral altars in Vietnamese diaspora communities in the U.S., that casts doubt on its use as a political symbol of anti-communism. Rather, Hoskins interprets it as a symbol of displacement and exile; 'Since South Vietnam as a state no longer exists, it is being commemorated as an ancestor - recognized as an earlier entity that once inspired loyalty and has now vanished' (Hoskins 2017, 130). This 'lost nation' (Hoskins 2017, 130) can inspire patriotic feelings linked to ancestors' sacrifice in a way that is redolent of restorative nostalgia. Alternatively, however, it could also be seen to provide the basis for a more reflective nostalgia that draws strength from past ancestors without recourse to contemporary nationalism. An analytical approach premised on the politics of longing allows for both possibilities, whereas an approach derived from methodological nationalism would make it difficult to analyse the flag as anything other than a symbol of support for South Vietnam and what it stood for.

Questioning the chronological continuity of national time shakes the very foundations of the national construct. In the case of Vietnam, Nguyễn-võ (2017, 71) effectively critiques the linear time of the nation, as presided over by none other than Hồ Chí Minh himself;

Hồ must be present, always, to ensure the flow of prophetic time, serving the current agenda of the ruling party. Hồ is all that you can be. Hồ is the corpse mummified and entombed, defying death from the nonplace of death.

The Vietnamese Communist Party government's carefully cultivated aura of respect and affection around 'Uncle Hồ' as a national father figure thus lives on as an embodiment of the nation that connects past, present and future. This is a classic example of a national hero linking and mobilising generations of nationalists across time. The cult of Hồ thus contributes to maintaining faith in the 'moral grandeur' (Anderson 1991, 144) of lives lived and sacrificed in the service of the nation and a better, common future. Nonetheless, not all subscribe to this nationalist temporality, which coexists with other temporalities in Vietnam and elsewhere.



The disconnect between official state commemoration of heroes and martyrs in the name of the nation on the one hand, and private rituals recalling the dead on the other, has been well-studied in the Vietnamese case (Kwon 2006, Schwenkel 2009, Sutherland 2014). For example, many people's connection to their dead ancestors escapes official nationalist attempts to insert them into an official nationalist narrative as victors or traitors in the Vietnam-American War. This is also known as the second Indochinese War because of its scope and its connections to the first, anti-colonial Indochinese War against France. Linked to this, Nguyễn-võ also pursues a rapprochement between Vietnamese studies and Black studies by critically examining cross-cutting examples of inter-colonial and anti-colonial discourse. Nguyễn-võ's work thus also speaks to the spatial dimension of the national norm in highlighting the liminality of the minority, racialised subject within the nation-state. Capable of state citizenship but not nationality - in the strict sense of cultural and ancestral belonging to the imagined nation - ethnic minorities often embody the limits of national belonging. In other words, they fill the gap between the persistent ideal of nation-state homogeneity, as highlighted in Rogers Brubaker's quote at the beginning of this chapter, and nation-states' actual ethnic diversity. As we have seen, it is possible to approach minorities, migrants and mobility in a way that is not premised on this ideal. Taking the argument one step further, the next section will show that the nation's 'Other' can perpetuate colonially-inflected categories.

### **Colonial Categories**

European and U.S. colonisation of Southeast Asia, which introduced Westphalian sovereignty and thereby shaped anti-colonial nationalisms across that region, has left a pervasive legacy in the ongoing nation-building of both its colonising and colonised powers (Anderson 1991). This pattern is repeated across the globe (Burton 2003.) For the purposes of this article, it is important to note that colonialism not only strongly influenced immigration flows to former colonial powers, but also continues to permeate (self-)understandings of 'native' and 'foreigner' as conceptual categories constituting the national norm. In *The Black Atlantic*, for example, Paul Gilroy (1993, 3) notes how black settlers in England have long been confronted with an 'underlying sense of England as a cohesive cultural community against which their self-conception has so often been defined.' This is a prime example of the racialised 'Other' invoked by Nguyễn-võ (2017), one who has the legal right to live in

Britain but not to belong there. Racialised 'Others' live *At the Edges of Citizenship* (Hepworth 2015) and within *New Hierarchies of Belonging* (Back and Sinha 2012), always standing out against the backdrop of the ethnically homogeneous national ideal. To take an Asian example, the field of Critical Han Studies explores the 'putative unity and empirical diversity' of the Han as China's majority group (Mullaney, 2012, 2). These critical scholars draw comparisons between Han and whiteness as largely taken for granted relational categories that only need manifest themselves in contrast to what they are not, namely a minority in size, colour or culture. Enjoying 'a powerful and hegemonic neutrality all its own', (Mullaney 2012, 3) Han is at the top of a hierarchy of belonging that effectively equates Chineseness with Han identity, ensuring that other ways of identifying as Chinese continue to be defined relationally as non-Han, ethnic minorities. This shows how patterns of power and domination shape the ethnic categories, that in turn shape the national norm. As Benedict Anderson (1991) has demonstrated with specific reference to Southeast Asia, many of these categories originated in the colonial census as a technology of power. This is but one lasting legacy of colonialism.

Paul Gilroy (1993, 3) points to forms of 'cultural insiderism' that 'typically construct the nation as an ethnically homogeneous object and invoke ethnicity a second time in the hermeneutic procedures deployed to make sense of its distinctive cultural content', thereby highlighting the lasting links between crude colonial racism, ethnic differentiation and Eurocentric cosmologies (cf. Burton 2003). Gilroy's critique (1993, 4) uses the 'fractal structure of the transcultural, international formation' he calls *The Black Atlantic* to transcend U.S. and British national boundaries and connect cultural studies across them. The enduring image of *The Black Atlantic* is important, therefore, in countering the methodological nationalism that takes nations as givens, and unquestioningly employs them as socio-political actors and basic units of analysis. As Robbie Shilliam (2015, 10) notes, however, the third point in the colonial Middle Passage, namely Africa, 'sits mostly silent' in Gilroy's analysis. Neither does Gilroy elaborate on or employ the materiality of the Atlantic Ocean itself to model an alternative analytical approach to the national ideal as a bounded whole moving through linear time.

In *The Black Pacific* (2015, 13), which obviously nods to Gilroy's work, Robbie Shilliam seeks to think outside Eurocentric, ethnonationalist worldviews and to treat the wounds of colonialism by 'bind(ing) back together the manifest and spiritual domains.' The book begins with a vignette in which Māori open a meeting with black British visitors to Aotearoa-New Zealand by acknowledging the dead in a way that neither reproduces colonial frameworks nor subscribes to a linear temporal approach that situates ancestors – and colonialism - in the past. Rather, Shilliam (2015, 8) uses this event to invoke an 'ethos of living other-wise' that is *decolonial*, as opposed to post- or anti-colonial, because it rejects colonially inflected knowledge frameworks altogether. Living 'other-wise' does not equate to being the racialised or minority 'Other.' On the contrary, it does not know what it is to be 'Other' because that category of thought and existence is unknown to a conceptual framework which 'refuse(s) the colonial conceit that European knowledge traditions hold supreme interpretive authority over the varied cosmologies and cultures of humanity' (Shilliam 2015, 8).

Shilliam's decolonial approach also has a temporal dimension in that it sets out to bridge the gap between humans and ancestors or spirits, a relationship rent asunder by colonialism and slavery. According to Shilliam (2015, 24), 'temporalities that bind back together the material and spiritual also bind (post)colonial presents back to decolonial pasts', thereby opening up further possibilities for rethinking relationships between people, time and place. Shilliam (2015, 21-2) shows how Māori cosmology, among others, adopts a configuration of time and space whereby the future lies behind and the past in front. To take another example, Māori cosmology emphasises the need to remember antecedents in order to stop war and conflict. Communicating with and pacifying wronged ancestors serves to repair breaches in the spiritual domain that bring rewards in the present. Comparable beliefs in the power of the dead to influence present lives are also widespread across Southeast Asia, from East Timor (De Matos Viegas and Graça Feijó 2017) to Vietnam (Kwon 2006). Liberated from the conventional national norm in spatiotemporal terms, then, it is possible to look at other, more fluid forms of national belonging that do not conform to boundedness and linearity. Shilliam's decolonial move completes the present article's critique of the national norm as a bounded entity moving through linear time,

and opens up the possibility of imagining community differently based on the conceptual fluidity of wet ontology (Steinberg and Peters 2015).

### **Wet Ontology**

Drawing inspiration from the constantly churning materiality of seas and oceans themselves, Phil Steinberg and Kim Peters (2015, 250) define wet ontology as ‘a perspective that problematizes accepted notions of time, space, mobility and materiality.’ They contrast this with the ‘politics of verticality’, which is also three-dimensional, but neatly layered in a way that merely adds depth to cartographic depictions of bounded nation-states or ‘multi-level governance’ (Sutherland 2010, 22). Wet ontologies, by contrast, break free of these strictures, evoking instead ‘space that can be harnessed and occupied in any direction’ (Steinberg and Peters 2015, 253). This approach is useful for stepping outside a national norm conceived in terms of bounded, homogeneous community in order to think of belonging in more fluid ways. For example, the contributors to Siu, Perdue and Tagliacozzo's (2015, 2, 3) edited collection entitled *Asia Inside Out: Connected Places* aimed to rethink ‘conceptual divides between land and ocean systems’ rather than taking places for granted ‘as natural, pre-existing receptacles of social content.’ As Edyta Roszko notes (2016), a thematic emphasis on ‘maritime connections’ serves to shift the focus towards dynamic, littoral societies and cross-cutting maritime flows, and away from territorially-centred analyses. For example, Epeli Hau'ofa (1993, 7) contrasts ‘the myths, legends and oral traditions, and the cosmologies of the people of Oceania [whose] universe comprised not only land surfaces, but the surrounding ocean’ with the perspective of ‘Europeans and Americans, who drew imaginary lines across the sea, making the colonial boundaries that, for the first time, confined ocean peoples to tiny spaces.’ This not only acknowledges the centrality of the sea to Oceania as an entity, but also highlights how colonialism carved it up using demarcations derived from lines on land that were patently unsuited to material fluidity.

Steinberg and Peters do not seek to conjure a “Liquid Continent” that, like a real continent, embraces many peoples, cultures and economies within a space with precise edges’ (Abulafia 2012, xxiii). They do not attempt to fetishise fluidity, or replace a bounded territory with the sea as an alternative container of identity

(Sutherland 2017, 69-70). Neither does the present analysis. Instead, it adopts wet ontology as a conceptual lens because it allows for a *politics* of fluidity, as encapsulated in the politics of longing, according to which movement is constitutive of space and time. This also allows for unanticipated formations that do not conform to the horizontal and vertical axes of spatial containment and linear progression that constitute the national norm. Wet ontology is also well-adapted to capturing migrant 'statuses that are temporary, uncertain and non-linear,' and thus goes beyond the crude binaries of citizen and foreigner, and legal or illegal immigrants (Gonzales and Sigona 2017, 7; see also Hepworth 2015). As migrants and minorities often constitute the liminal or national 'out-group', wet ontology combined with a politics of longing is a particularly useful device for decoupling national belonging from linear time and bounded space.

Applying the notion of wet ontology to national belonging helps analysts step outside taken for granted dichotomies of self and other, nationalism and cosmopolitanism, majority and minority, native and foreigner, and transcend the ethnonational categorisations that underpin hybridity and multiculturalism. Instead, it allows for a sense of national belonging to ebb and flow in many directions unconstrained by conventional understandings of national time and space, for individual currents to tow at different rates, and for floating and friction between them. That is, analysts can consider individuals' sense of belonging on their own terms, rather than in relation to a dominant national frame. Wet ontology thus supports the aim of this article in operating outside methodological nationalism, precisely in order to highlight the 'power over classifying, naming and partitioning migrants/refugees' (De Genova 2017, 9) that is inherent in the nation-state system. Wet ontology is an appropriate theoretical lens through which to reconsider cross-border migration as necessarily anomalous.

If the solid national community moving through calendrical time is no longer the norm, then wet ontology allows us to think through the nation in much more fluid ways. Combined with a politics of longing, it better describes the fluidity and multi-dimensional temporality of belonging than closed categories of 'us' and 'them', or past, present and future. The politics of longing thereby complements wet ontology to provide a more open analytical framework than methodological nationalism, one

that can encompass national belonging but is by no means encapsulated within it. In contrast to Anderson, who depicted national time as simply superseding 'simultaneous' time with an unquestioned, underlying chronological framework, multi-directional temporality is better rendered through the fluidity of wet ontology, which offers a broader analytical perspective on the nation than one which replicates nationalism's own assumptions of bounded space and linear time. For example, rather than single someone out for analysis as a migrant - a label that only makes sense in relation to a border - an approach premised on wet ontology would start with that individual's experience of mobility. The next section goes on to unpack conceptions of migrant belonging in more detail.

### **Migrant Mobilities**

What does it mean in practice to untether a sense of belonging to the nation from the spatial constraints of the nation, migration, (minority) ethnicity and territoriality, on the one hand, and the temporal limits of linear, chronological time on the other? Critical analyses of migration offer yet another means of subverting ethnonational categories premised on states and stasis, as opposed to mobility (Sutherland 2017). Indeed, Nicholas De Genova (2017, 6) notes that 'if there were no borders, there would be no migration – only mobility,' thereby highlighting how much the very concept of immigration is imbricated with a nation-state's sovereignty over a bounded territory. De Genova also draws attention to the temporality of migration, which subjects migrants to border enforcement that can be arbitrary - especially during so-called 'crises' - and which is always predicated upon the 'accident of birth' that is nationality (Brubaker 2015, 20).

As Gonzales and Sigona (2017, 9) have noted, in 'an increasingly mobile world, migration muddles the distinction between insider and outsider and unsettles consolidated categories of analysis.' In order to explore the ramifications and critical implications of migration as a contemporary phenomenon, it is necessary to take the long view of migration as a state-constituted category that describes and controls human mobility. It is also necessary to engage in theory-building that transcends state-centric methodological nationalism, for this merely replicates the same ethnonational categories of belonging that nationalists use as a point of departure, rather than making them objects of analysis and critique. A sense of belonging is not

a fixed category. As Nira Yuval-Davis (2006, 199) points out, 'belonging is always a dynamic process, not a reified fixity, which is only a naturalized construction of a particular hegemonic form of power relations.' A politics of longing premised on wet ontology can capture this in a way that methodological nationalism cannot. That is, national belonging is often imposed as an organisational category that may not fit with an individual's own sense of identity and their lived reality.

Relating a sense of belonging to shifting power relations can also aid understanding of why people emphasise some aspects of their identity over others at different points in time (Winter 2009, 136). The nation as a *starting point* of analysis, then, together with all its ingrained assumptions as to chronological ancestral continuity and rootedness in a 'homeland', is found wanting because it cannot capture this complexity. Taking wet ontology as a starting point, by contrast, allows for fluidity across time and space in constructing a sense of home and belonging. According to this approach, the nation may form a more or less important part of the final analysis, but not *necessarily* so. For example, Robbie Shilliam (2015, 2) notes how a group of Rastafarians who had travelled from their home in the United Kingdom to New Zealand explicitly 'rerouted' their origins to Ethiopia. In other words, they chose not to be defined as British but instead made their provenance their choice, based on a sense of belonging that fell outside standard ethnonational categories.

Anita Brun and Cathrine Fåbos (2015) propose the three analytical levels of *home*, *Home* and *HOME* to distinguish, respectively, everyday homemaking practices, a value-driven sense of heritage and belonging, and the global sociopolitical context framing origins and belonging. They do so in the context of migrants' and refugees' active role in shaping diverse and overlapping layers of home that do not map neatly onto where they were born or their ancestral lineage. Linked to this, Nira Yuval-Davis' (2006) tripartite analysis of belonging in terms of social location, emotional identification and values highlights the power relations inherent in each. In turn, these analyses of 'social power axes, not of social identities' (Yuval-Davis 2006, 201) chime with Rogers Brubaker's (2015) discussion of difference and inequality quoted at the outset of this article. Whereas Brun and Fåbos highlight migrants' agency in shaping their own sense of connection and belonging, whether in a bleak refugee camp or an adopted homeland, Brubaker (2015, 20) uses the term 'forced immobility' to describe the vast majority of the world's population whose citizenship status

constrains their freedom to move abroad for work, for love, or for simple survival. That is, their mobility, residency and citizenship status may be controlled, but their sense of belonging cannot be policed in the same way, and a politics of longing premised on wet ontology recognises this. If we posit mobility as the norm, we also need to view this through a theoretical lens that does not reproduce the static, bounded approach of methodological nationalism. The final section draws on an exhibition entitled *Oceania* to provide further illustration of the politics of longing as an analytical approach premised on wet ontology.

### **The Politics of Longing on Display**

Wet ontology grasps mobility conceptually by thinking through the materiality of the oceans and seas, but it need not evoke the sea itself. Indeed, Steinberg and Peters (2015) themselves turn to the highlands of Southeast Asia to illustrate their approach. However, as Epeli Hau'ofa (1993, 8) notes, “‘Oceania’ connotes a sea of islands’ as opposed to islands in the sea, thereby privileging a seaborne perspective over land-centred references to the Pacific Islands. This is important because seaborne mobility was an inextricable part of islanders’ life until colonialism carved up the region; ‘They played in it as soon as they could walk steadily, they worked in it, they fought on it. They developed great skills for navigating their waters’ (Hau’ofa 1993, 8). In turn, the *Oceania* exhibition helps to exemplify the politics of longing because it is not entirely delimited by the nation in space or time, even though it may do no more than gesture towards the possibility of transcending national space-time.

This section illustrates the politics of longing using elements from the temporary exhibition entitled *Oceania*, held at London’s Royal Academy in late 2018. Mounted in collaboration with the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris and the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge, UK, it brought together around two hundred historical artefacts from the eighteenth century onwards, interspersed with artworks by contemporary artists from the region including Lisa Reihana, John Pule and the Mata Aho collective. The exhibition was supported by New Zealand, Tonga and Papua New Guinea, among other partners, and offered free entry to all New Zealand and Pacific Island passport holders. The first room of the exhibition in particular evoked the politics of longing, which transcends the analytical frame of



methodological nationalism, without jettisoning the nation as a potential focus of belonging.

The exhibition began conventionally enough. Dominating one wall of the first room was a wall map depicting the archipelagos of Polynesia, Melanesia and Micronesia in two-dimensional, cartographic form, as divided by 'European geographers' (Oceania leaflet 2018). This is a typical way of depicting the nation in space, in terms of neatly bordered nation-states. The map also covered one side of the leaflet handed out with the entrance tickets (Oceania leaflet 2018), the text of which unapologetically begins by framing the exhibition in starkly Anglocentric terms;

Two hundred and fifty years ago, in August 1768, four months before George III founded the Royal Academy of Arts, Lieutenant (later Captain) James Cook left Plymouth in command of the HMS *Endeavour*. The ship and its crew were embarking on a scientific expedition funded by the Royal Society to track the transit of Venus in Tahiti and to explore the Southern Hemisphere for the Admiralty.

The leaflet does not note that George III was a British king, spell out the meaning of HMS, or explain the significance of the Royal Academy of Arts or the Royal Society to visitors. Instead, it assumed that its target audience of metropolitan Londoners, and others willing and able to travel to the venue and pay the high entrance fee of £20 (notwithstanding the offer to New Zealand and Pacific Island citizens), was aware of this context. In this way, Oceania is framed from a standard Eurocentric perspective, using colonial tropes of scientific progress, exploration and discovery (see Powles 2018). This illustrates the use of colonial categories in contemporary practice. Only once the leaflet has established that the Pacific Ocean 'was largely unknown to Europeans at the time' is any information provided about 'the diverse, sophisticated and vibrant societies that they encountered' and a history of human population stretching back 30,000 years (Oceania leaflet 2018). This shows how today, an exhibition about a continent and its people is still unreflectingly presented from a European, specifically British, perspective on the foreign, unknown Other.

Figure 1: First room of Oceania exhibition featuring wall map. Photograph by the author, October 2018



Visitors to the Oceania exhibition were naturally drawn to the familiar format of the political, territorially delineated map in order to situate Oceania in space (see figure 1). Nevertheless, the entrance to the exhibition was actually dominated by an alternative starting point to the map and the leaflet, namely an imposing artwork by the Mata Aho collective entitled *Kiko Moana* (see figure 2). This exhibition layout effectively juxtaposed methodological nationalism as a framing device - embodied in the map - with a representation more in tune with wet ontology and the possibility of

conceptualising home and belonging through a politics of longing. That is, an approach whereby mobility is not necessarily defined in terms of migration across nation-state borders or colonially-inflected categories, and belonging is conceived as a fluid and individual sense of affinity.

Stretching to eleven metres of textured, slashed and layered blue tarpaulin, *Kiko Moana* rises up in a huge, tsunami-like wave to fill the space. Despite its arresting size and shimmering beauty, it is initially difficult to interpret beyond a clear association with the ocean which - as is obvious from a glance at the adjacent map and the introductory text - 'evokes the sea that both connects and separates this vast region' (Oceania leaflet 2018). However, as the Māori artists that make up the collective explain in a video on the exhibition website, *Kiko Moana* speaks to much more than that, variously evoking environmental pressures, Māori beliefs and individual life stories.<sup>1</sup> The female artists' collective also clearly and explicitly links its working practices to ancestral ways of coming together to learn, work and collaborate. The artists understand *Kiko Moana*, roughly translated as the substance of the ocean, to be a living entity connected to Taniwha, or water guardians. A website connected to the work and acquired by the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa consists of a 'multiplicity of indigenous narratives' recording Māori people's understandings of and personal stories about Taniwha (kikomoana.com). These twenty-four 'Taniwha tales' recount everything from legends to personal experiences and memories of encounters with Taniwha, thereby imbuing the fabric of *Kiko Moana* with further layers of personalised significance and meaning.

Figure 2: *Kiko Moana* by the Mata Aho collective at the Oceania exhibition. Photograph by the author, October 2018



The Taniwha tales effectively illustrate the spiritual element of the politics of longing, whether expressed through actual encounters with the water guardians, or the symbolism associated with these creatures. They exemplify the politics of longing, not through a sentimental, restorative nostalgia, but rather through a no-nonsense engagement with natural phenomena and their meanings for individuals, families and wider communities. There are as many takes on Taniwha as there are tales, and these could no doubt be endlessly multiplied. The tales do not emphasise any single source of authority on Taniwha. Nor do they seek to define a right or wrong way to engage with Taniwha, and thereby Māori cosmology more generally. What emerges is a multifaceted whole made up of many individual perspectives and experiences that has scope to include broader cosmologies, spiritual connections and ways of belonging that simply cannot be captured by ethnonational categories, cartographic mapping or methodological nationalism. Thus, *Kiko Moana* is illustrative of a politics

of longing underpinned by wet ontology rather than categories constructed from methodological nationalism or a Eurocentrism grounded in colonial exploration.

*Kiko Moana* appears to be a much more fitting introduction to Oceania than a map, firstly because it evokes rather than depicts that place. The reference to the sea itself points to the fluidity of wet ontology, and this is supported by the multiple indigenous narratives underlying Oceania and its people's sense of belonging. Reading the Taniwha tales illustrates how there is no one way to interpret or experience Māori cosmology and the multifaceted significance of Oceania, spiritual or otherwise. At the same time, New Zealand's national museum's acquisition of *Kiko Moana* gives it the imprimatur of national heritage, thereby placing it within the political framework of the nation-state. As such, the national narrative is by no means absent from this work, as it operates within ongoing efforts to validate, recognise and celebrate Māori belonging within the context of the New Zealand nation-state, and ongoing indigenous struggles for recognition across the world (Coulthard 2014). Yet it also speaks to the sea, mobility and 'voyaging' across the Pacific Ocean as central to the identities and histories of its indigenous peoples, not least since New Zealand was among the last Pacific islands to be settled, between 800 and 1200 CE. Together, this suggests that national identity need not be premised on bounded assumptions of 'them' and 'us', insider and outsider, native and foreigner. These binaries can be transcended using an analytical approach that avoids methodological nationalism and considering mobility in terms of cross-border migration, and that embraces the fluidity of a politics of longing premised on wet ontology instead.

The second room in the *Oceania* exhibition, bathed in a dappled and shifting blue light that strongly suggests immersion in water, explores the importance of seafaring to Pacific island cultures. It also evokes the fluidity conceptualised in the politics of longing and wet ontology. As a strong counterpoint to the wall map in the entrance, it features a navigational chart from the Marshall Islands made of sticks and cowrie shells (see figure 3). These charts depicted the materiality of the sea, specifically ocean swells, from the perspective of the maker, and could only be fully explained by that individual; 'The chart is less a literal representation of the sea, but more an abstract illustration of the ways that ocean swells interact with land.' (Romm 2015, online). This was born of a necessity to read or 'feel' the ocean using a system called



wave piloting, given that the Marshall islands are so flat as to be very difficult to spot from the water. The inherent subjectivity of these charts and their aim to trace fluidity stand in stark contrast to the 'objective' truth claims of conventional, two-dimensional political cartography in clearly delineating and dividing nation-state spaces.

Before trying to understand the broader motion of the sea using navigational charts, 'young men and women learning wave piloting would spend hours floating in the ocean blindfolded, memorizing the minute sensations of waves, currents and swells beneath them' (Langlois 2016, online). Navigational charts as individualised depictions of seaborne experience contrast strongly with the neatly bordered containers represented in two-dimensional cartography, which are replete with the colonial associations spelled out in the exhibition leaflet. On the contrary, navigational charts recall wet ontology in rendering fluidity and flow rather than an ordered patchwork of places, thereby echoing *Kiko Moana*'s evocation of an 'ethos of living other-wise' (Shilliam 2015, 8) that is not premised on colonial categories. The nation-state borders that determine migrant mobility are absent, and so methodological nationalism does not frame the seascape they depict. Despite the exhibition's bald attempt to view Oceania through a Eurocentric lens unchanged since colonial times, both *Kiko Moana* and the navigational charts resist this interpretation in their focus on fluidity and a multiplicity of perspectives.

Figure 3: Detail from the Oceania exhibition featuring a navigational chart. Photograph by the author, October 2018



## Conclusion

The politics of longing posits that the nation is but one among many, and by no means a necessary, frame of reference for an individual's sense of belonging. It encompasses both restorative and reflective nostalgia as possible means of connecting individual narratives of belonging with ancestors and (national) heritage. As such, it derives from a wet ontology that does not presuppose the nation 'is conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history' (Anderson 1991, 26). The advantage this approach offers over methodological nationalism is that it allows for knitting together narratives of home and belonging in many different ways, both within and outwith the national frame. What is more, its inherent indebtedness to fluidity also puts migrant mobility on a par with rootedness and ancestry, rather than relegating it to a relational category that can never measure up to an aspirational ideal of native national belonging. As Kumarakulasingam (2016, 52) argues in the context of European colonialism; 'Not only does the historical not exhaust our worlds, but history itself was administered to the majority of the world as a means of getting them to accept their subjugation to the White Master.' Attempts to take a sense of national belonging out of linear time acknowledge the legacy of colonialism as foundational to our current global order. The politics of longing is but one more attempt to engage with this legacy and step outside over-simplified dichotomies of belonging, in order to place the nation within a broader analytical framework premised on fluidity and mobility rather than linearity and homogeneity.

This article has sought to challenge the spatial and temporal assumptions underlying the nation and the nation-state system that turn mobility into migration and people into minorities. Instead, it has explored a more fluid and dynamic approach to a sense of national belonging using the politics of longing. This approach subverts ethnonational categorisation as a starting point of analysis. Robbie Shilliam (2015, 26) notes that 'one of the most signal qualities of Te Ao Māori (the Māori world) is just how many diverse and sometimes conflicting stories peoples have of themselves and of their relationships.' This shows how links to ancestors are both manifold and malleable, and how they can be variously called upon and valorised for present day purposes. Here we see the fluidity and mobility of wet ontology applied in practice. People are not so much in thrall to their ancestors, as (nationalist) metaphors of rootedness or long, linear genealogies might suggest. Rather, they craft spiritual

relationships to the past within wider cosmologies that do not necessarily conform to dominant ethnonational categories, far less nationalist narratives of 'them' and 'us'.

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